



Women empowerment through Mahatma Gandhi National rural employment guarantee scheme in Himachal Pradesh: a study of Mandi district

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Abstract

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) provides a legal Guarantee of 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every rural household. It is also committed to ensure that at least 33% of the workers shall be women. The study aims to analyze the relevance of MNREGS on women empowerment in the Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh State. Data were drawn from 250 responders through a field survey in 2016 using the random stratified sampling technique. Keeping the objective of study in mind, an elaborate interview schedule was designed to search out information from respondents. It helped in meeting the beneficiaries, investigating motives and feelings, etc. Significant benefit reported by the study includes success in raising the level of employment and income of the rural household women, thereby enhancing their purchasing power, satisfaction, confidence etc.

Keywords: women's empowerment, unemployment, poverty

Introduction

According to the United Nations Millennium Campaign the overwhelming majority of the labor that sustains life -growing food, cooking, raising children, caring for the elderly, maintaining a house, hauling water – is done by women, and universally this work is accorded low status and no pay. The role of women in protecting the family members from hunger and poverty had been highlighted by Rosi Braidotti (1994) and Caroline Moser (1988, 1989). According to them, in 1980's the international economic conditions and debt crisis led to increasing poverty of populations in the south and to what was termed a 'feminization of poverty'. An increasing number of women became providers of family subsistence, while men often migrated in search employment. In many societies around the world, women never belong wholly to themselves; they are the property of others throughout their lives. Their physical well-being – health, security and bodily integrity – is often beyond their own control. Where women have no control over money, they cannot choose to get health care for themselves or their children.

The word women empowerment essentially means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day- to- day lives in the social, political and economic terms -a power which enables them to move from the periphery to the centre stage. (Dasarathi, B. 2006) ^[1]. When women have economic empowerment, it is a way for others to see them as equal members of society. Through this, they achieve more self-respect and confidence by their contributions to their communities. When women have the agency to do what she wants, a higher equality between men and women is established (Sughosh India Foundation 2010) ^[11]. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). Women today are demanding their position in the society.

Women have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of existence and are in search of ways to battle them. The Indian women have cast of their age old shackles of serfdom and male domination. Notwithstanding the remarkable changes in the position of women in free India, there is still a great divergence between the constitutional position and stark reality of deprivation and 109 degradation (Dasarathi, B. 2006) ^[1]. Whatever the changes has blown in society, has been enjoyed by the urban women, their population living in rural areas are still totally unaffected by the twist of changes. In the Panchayati Raj system, however, women have been given representation as a symbol of empowerment and there are many elected women representatives at the village council level but they are members on documentation only as women representatives are not free from male dominance in the village administration and no noteworthy alteration in the power is seen in the villages.

MNREGA and women

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) provides a legal Guarantee of 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to every rural household. The participation of women in the workforce has surpassed the statutory minimum requirement of 33 percent and through this it has protected the

women justice and rights. The Act provides some explicit entitlements for women to facilitate their full participation. These include:

Equal wages for men and women—‘Equal wages shall be paid to both men and women workers and the provisions of Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 shall be complied with.’ (p.26)

*Participation in Management and monitoring of the programme – ‘The gram sabha will elect the members of the committee and ensure that SC/STs and women are represented on it.’ (p.44)

Participation in social audit –‘The timing of the forum must be such that it is convenient for people to attend – that it is convenient for REGS (Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) workers, women and marginalized communities.’ (p.56)

Providing support for child care, and convenience to households – The guidelines mention the need for a crèche at the worksite, and for the works to be convenient for families: Ensuring that single women are eligible –

By recognizing a single person as a ‘household’, the Act makes it possible for widows and other single women to access this work for widows and other single women to access work. (nrega.nic.in)

Relevance of the study

The explanation for relevance of a study may be given from the point of view of two major considerations. One, the ‘women’ is a major focus of the program in so far as the employment guarantee policy is seen as an instrument that can support job creation and bring about gender equality, essential for empowerment. And two, the program itself, in course of its implementation has brought into focus several issues concerning gender and poverty which should to be examined intimately for deriving planning lessons.

Previous studies on impact of MNREGS on women empowerment By putting cash incomes into hands, NREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. As mentioned, this was one of NREGA’s main aims: with the increased participation of women in household income-generation a positive contribution to gender relations can be made. The survey data (both qualitative and quantitative) suggest that women workers are more confident about their roles as contribution to family expenditure and their work decision, and that they are also becoming more assertive about their space in the public sphere (Asha Sharma 2012). The significant contribution of NREGS was that it has removed these constraints as the wage employment was made available within or closer to the village.

It has provided them with the opportunity to earn without having had to forgo their other familiar obligations.(Singh, Nauriyal,2009). Looking at the response from widows separately, NREGA was also considered “very important” by 82% of widows in the sample. Of the total sample, more than two-thirds (69%) of the sample 110 workers stated the NREGA had helped them avoid hunger, while 57% stated the NREGA had helped them avoid migration and equal proportion of workers also said they had used NREGA wages to buy medicines in the last 12 months.(Khera, R. and Nayak, N. 2009)

All the women workers according to Thomas, EM. (2010) are fully satisfied with NREGS works. The main reason for their satisfaction is that; today they are assured of 100 days of jobs. It means that no longer they have to fear the occurrence of seasonal unemployment and poverty. Likewise all of them unanimously opine that, the NREGS enabled them to participate effectively in the civil society. Now all they have no fear to enter in to a commercial bank or government office to hold discussions with the officials. The overall impact of NREGA on women’s lives is quite positive in many ways, whether it is by enhancing their economic independence and self-confidence, contributing to food security, helping to reduce distress migration, or fostering better awareness (and wider enforcement) of minimum wages. The role of NREGA as a tool of women’s empowerment deserves much more attention than it has received so far. (Jandu, N. 2008) ^[13]. Account payment of wages also creates some other effects. Apart from increasing the chances for greater control over earnings, it leads to the development of a saving habit. Initially, most of these workers used to withdraw their entire wages at one go. Gradually, they have started withdrawing as per their needs. This has an added advantage as women are able to save money from wasteful expenditure, if husbands or other male members tend to spend on items like liquor. Women were also found to invest in fixed deposit schemes in the same bank (Pankaj, A. and R, Tankha. 2010) ^[6].

Research objectives

To know the relevance of MNREGS for women empowerment, the primary objective of the research is to study the impact of MNREGP on women empowerment and to identify major constraints, if any, on women’s access to productive employment opportunities through MNREGP.

Selection of district

The Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh for Quick Appraisal of MNREGS was selected in consultation with the government officials based on the criteria that district which has experienced significant good impact under MNREGA in terms of number of woman given employment. There are five blocks- Mandi Sadar, Balh, Gopalpur, Dharpur and Chauntra. Four to five villages from each block were chosen as suggested by Block officials. Based on the nature and dynamics of the villages in Mandi and also while ensuring that larger representation is maintained, the villages were selected primarily as per the provisions of the project and based on their performances.

Research and sample design

The primary data source was household level data being collected through especially designed semi structured interviews/questionnaire, the job cards and the MIS reports/Monthly/quarterly progress reports of the District Program Coordinators and the district specific reports collected at the state level. On the whole, the basic method of data collection has been focus group discussions and few semi structured/ structured interviews with key informants besides information available through official statistics of the implementing agencies as indicated above. A random sampling was also done to select women workers from worksites. The target number of sample workers was 250 from 5 blocks of Mandi district.

A background of MNREGS beneficiaries

By putting cash incomes into their hands, MNREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women implying empowerment. In the study area, the MNREGA has provided income earning opportunities to women where hardly any existed before. The survey was focused on women specifically; the interviews with women workers provided insights into the significance of MNREGA work for these women and highlighted the “transformative” role of this scheme in enhancing the empowerment of women workers.

Table 1: Sample Profile

	Beneficiaries
Number of beneficiaries selected	250
Literate (in %)	12
SC (in %)	84
SC (in %)	7.7
OBC (in %)	8.3
Agriculture work (in %)	61
Other casual work (in %)	12
Wages under MNREGS they are getting (Rs. per day)	179

Source: Field survey

Less than one third were illiterate and another one-fourth was only functionally literate. Most of them were married and were from nuclear families. Some 45% were in the fertility age group: 55% in the age group of 30-45 years and another 22% in the age group of 18-29 years and 8% were also above 60 years. The income and assets base of these households was poor. 95% of those having land were only marginal landholders. Most of the beneficiaries were from schedule and backward classes. The combination of a labour surplus economy and gender based division of labour, imply that these opportunities have a tendency to be cyclic in nature. There are even less opportunities for non-agricultural wage work in these areas where the rural economy is mainly agricultural. Some women stated they did not engage themselves in agricultural wage labour earlier because they were paid too little and it was not meaningful to go out and work for a minute allowance.

Empowerment impacts

The economic dependence of women on men in rural India plays a major role in the subjugation of women, and in this respect the MNREGA is an important tool of social change. (Drèze, J. and Oldiges, C.2007). But how has paid employment under MNREGS changed the position of rural women? Answer of this question can be finding out by knowing impact of this scheme on women workers. The table given below indicates that all the women workers are satisfied with MNREGS works. The main reason for their satisfaction is that; they are guaranteed 100 days of jobs. It means that no longer have they to fear the episode of seasonal unemployment and poverty and not only this MNREGS enabled them to participate effectively in society.

Major findings

- 95.5% of them believe that, the programme enhanced their credit worthiness and 78% women believe that, they could start saving some money only because of the MNREGS.
- Women's MNREGA earnings have increased their contribution to household income. A large majority (76 per cent) of the respondents said that they spent wages on regular food and consumer goods. The increased income locally available through NREGA work, they felt, is helping to ensure at least two regular meals in a day.
- According to most of the beneficiaries, the amount earned through MNREGA is insufficient to repay debts. Nevertheless, 49.1 per cent of the respondents said that they had spent their wages on repaying small debts. Not only this, it also helps them to keep themselves away from the grip of local moneylenders.

Table 2: Impact of MNREGS on women empowerment

	Increased (%)	Somewhat (%)	No change (%)
Satisfaction	91	9	0

Self confidence	67	20	13
Participation in society	34.5	24.6	40.9
Savings	70.9	21	8.1
Repayment of family debt	49.1	46.4	4.5
Education	37.1	20.9	58.1
Medicine	62.7	21.8	15.5
Supporting of family	88.2	11.8	0
Empowerment to meet govt./bank officials	59.1	33.6	7.3
Economic independence	70.9	10.9	18.2
Social Contacts	66.4	19.1	14.5

Source: Field survey

- More over the income from MNREGS helped them to increase the expenditure on education of their children (37.1%), medical expenses (62.7%). At the same time 92% of the women had the view that today, only because of the MNREGS, they are able to support their families and 71% opined that, the income from the MNREGS works provided economic independence to them. They are no longer dependent on the income earned by their husbands.
- 66.4% women asserted that MNREGS contributed much to the improvement of their social contact. In other words, the new wage employment programme succeeded ensuring freedom and equality for women in civil, economic and social areas of activity (Thomas, E.M. 2010)
- Participation in the scheme has meant that women (65%) are coming out of their homes, not only to work but also to visit banks which they have not done in the past. 'Women can now be seen moving around in places like gram panchayat office, banks, schools, block office without anybody to accompany them.' (Sudarshan 2011)
- Power over utilization of money: 'What you do with your money?' was one our question to the women workers interviewed. Out of 250 women workers interviewed, as many as 78% was found to be confident about use of the money by herself which is great step ahead in terms of women empowerment. By putting cash incomes into their hands, NREGA is beginning to create a greater degree of economic independence among women. (Navjyoti, J. 2008)
- It is also clear that men and women are paid equal wages at MNREGA worksites as has been mandated by the Act. Wage gaps between the male and female casual workers have been one of the norm in rural India, this change is an extremely significant development which brings the feeling of equality among women. MNREGA enabled women workers to stop working for a local landlord, who pays wages women less than men. She is using MNREGA earnings to buy food to feed her family, books and clothes for her children and she is also able to purchase some cosmetics for herself.

Obstacles to women workers

However, MNREGS benefits have not come easily – their leisure time has misplaced with working hours for women and not only this have they to bear with physical and emotional strains. Some of the obstacles that we found during survey were as follows:

- While identifying the step of projects at Block level, very little was considered as regards suitability of women. In other words, hardly any project was selected in terms of providing direct benefit to women.
- The MNREGA guidelines provide certain positive action to encourage women participation in the program like facilities for crèche, drinking water, shade and first aid are required to be provided at every worksite. The findings show that with the exception of provision for drinking water, other worksite facilities viz. crèche, resting place, first-aid, recreational facility for children etc. and other facilities for the betterment of gender were generally absent in the worksites.
- As regards other household works, most respondents said, they don't get any support from their husbands and most of the domestic work like cooking, and care related works they used to do after return from work. This means, their working hours has been extended due to MNREGA.
- Delayed payments also come in the way of participation of poor women. Delays in wage payments make it difficult especially for single women, who cannot afford to wait as they are the only earners in the family. When they do not get wages in time, they are bound to return to previous, less preferred job. Delay in wages is due to the reason as the money is released only after submission of the completion report of every project by area engineer, which is a relatively long process.
- Another constraint is the introduction of wage payments through banks. When a single account is opened per job card the account is generally opened in the name of a male member of the family. This means that women are still relying on men to withdraw their wages. This decreases the participation of women in this programme.
- The awareness of MNREGA and workers entitlements is very low. In many villages, there has been a deliberate attempt not to disseminate complete information regarding the MNREGA. Most people are not even aware of the fact that they should apply for work and also of getting unemployment allowance in case of not getting work.

- Beneficiaries are neither getting 100 days of work nor unemployment allowance for that. It therefore loses its main attraction point.

Suggestions

- Major suggestions by which effectiveness of this programme can be increased are-
- The Panchayat must create awareness among the local people about MNREGA. Awareness levels among the workers regarding rights, entitlements, provisions and procedures under MNREGS was found very low which shows poor performance of the officials.
- It is not sufficient to put some special facilities such as drinking water, shade for children, periods of rest and a first aid box care etc. on papers but implementation and maintenance must be done properly.
- However, overall in Himachal Pradesh only 11.08 per cent participating households completed 100 days of employment under MNREGS. It should be assured that participation days should be increased otherwise for few days nobody will give break in present job.
- Involvement of NGOs in MNREGS has been very low. This feature requires to be strengthened to make the rights-based MNREGS more successful and meaningful.
- It may be stressed here that effective information flows and dissemination about the various angles of this provision of the Scheme and also about the roles and responsibilities of the officials, Sarpanch and Gram Pradhans through all types of media and channels in the rural areas are essential. Then only this scheme can be performed in a meaningful sense and degree.
- There should be joint bank accounts so women easily can withdraw money according to their need.
- Some of the projects should be designed in such a way that can be done easily by women as all projects are not appropriate for woman.

Conclusion

Viewed in a wider outlook, MNREGA signals a possible reshaping of priorities in India through a democratic determination to provide real livelihood opportunities for the rural poor. The MNREGA is a wage employment program, providing minimum wage employment to casual, unskilled labour, women, disabled especially during those days in which they are jobless or free from agriculture work. Gender has never been at the centre stage of the program as a policy. But still due to its provision for women, MNREGA has emerged as a very powerful tool for women empowerment. This programme of government has taken care of that corner which remained untouched from changes in society from last many years.

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